

The

February 2004

Ballarat Naturalist



Spot-tailed Quoll

The Importance of Conservation on Private Land

Dr. Chris Williams: Conservation Manager, Trust for Nature

The Trust for Nature was established in 1972 by the Hamer Government as the Victorian Conservation Trust, dedicated to the preservation of biodiversity on private land. Impetus was given to the movement after the campaign to preserve the Little Desert and establish the various Mallee National Parks. Land was to be bought or donated to the Trust, then transferred to the Crown. Churchill Island was the first property to be protected in this way.

Why conserve? Australia's biological heritage is one of highly endemic species which are unique and of great diversity, viz. 85% of vascular plants are endemic, 84% of mammals, 89% of reptiles, 45% of birds, and 95% of frogs. 65% of land in Australia is privately managed, and many significant habitats and species occur on private land. 31% of endangered species have significant populations on private land.

Under the scheme whereby property owners legally protect land by permanent protection on the title, 500 covenants have now been established, encompassing 24,000 ha.

Chris showed us two contrasting maps depicting the distribution of Victoria's vegetation as it was thought to be at 1750 and at the present day. Aerial photos complemented these maps and emphasised the degree of clearing.

Threats to biodiversity include:

- Land clearing, leading to habitat loss and fragmentation.
- Harvesting e.g. of fallen timber.
- Chronic defoliation by herbivorous insects.

- Exotic weeds and animals.
- Changed hydrological characteristics, soil compaction, nutrient enrichment.
- Altered fire regimes.
- Continued subdivision and development.

So the TFN's mission is to strive to ensure that all significant areas of Victoria are privately owned. This can be done by:

- Buying land eg. the recent purchase of Mt Elephant.
- Voluntary covenants.
- Public appeals.
- Revolving fund (to purchase properties with high, extant conservation values and high potential for re-sale to a target "bush market").
- Conservation training and education.
- Supporters program.
- Advocacy for private land conservation (persuading your neighbour to join).

Future Directions:

- Conservation at landscape scale e.g. a whole catchment or other natural unit.
- Expansion in use of covenants and revolving funds etc.
- Stewardship.
- Incentive schemes such as rate rebates, tax deductions, specific grants.
- Bush practice (partnerships).
- Establishing a national organisation.

Discussions around these topics included a suggestion that the fox problem could perhaps be controlled by lifting the numbers of native predators such as dingoes. Chris wondered whether it could be overstocking, not just fox numbers, which deplete populations of bettongs and bilbies and similar creatures. He quoted the successful aerial baiting program in W.A. whereby 1080 can be used against foxes and feral cats without affecting native mammals which are immune to the poison as it occurs naturally in species of bitter-pea in that state.

Eynesbury Excursion

Leader: John Gregurke

Eynesbury is a large property of over 12,000 acres situated south of Melton and within sight of the skyscrapers of Melbourne. The Werribee River forms its eastern boundary. Eynesbury along with Werribee Park and Staughton Vale were three large properties that date from first white settlement in the area. On Eynesbury an area of 640 acres had been fenced off and left in its natural state. This area was the main focus of our excursion.

Melton Reservoir, a few kilometres north of Eynesbury was our first stop for the day. The water level was about 7 metres below full level. The low water revealed one of several thin lava flows probably from nearby Mt. Cottrell. The cicadas were calling in the warm sunny weather. There were few birds on the reservoir as well as one speed boat. A female mudlark was sitting on its nest in a grey box tree and a brown falcon was seen in a dead tree.

Grey box comprised nearly all the tall trees on the area mentioned above on Eynesbury. There were a few Casuarinas, Golden and Gold-dust Wattles were the main understorey species. Plants in flower were not common. Some of the ones that were included bluebells *Wahlenbergia sp.*, *Dianella sp.*, Spineless Eutaxia with a few yellow pea flowers, Cassinias, Nodding Saltbush and Wood Sorrel and a small *Goodea*. Various varieties of spear-grass, wallaby and kangaroo grass were seen. A few exotic plants included Slender Thistle, Horehound and Veldt Grass.

The most common species of bird was the Tree Martin which were flying above the trees catching insects. A pair of Tree Martins were seen in a hole in a tree. Other birds seen in this area included the Striated Pardalote, Red-rumped Parrot, Varied Sitella, Yellow Robin, Buff-rumped Thornbill, Grey Fantail and Superb Fairy Wren. There was no blossom on the box trees so honey-eaters were scarce. There was a large eagle's nest in a tree but no sign of an eagle. A cicada that had just emerged from the nymph stage was seen. It was a delicate lime green in colour with pink-edged translucent wings.

A juvenile bearded dragon lizard was seen sunning itself in the entrance of a rabbit burrow. The remains of saltbush fruits were on the ground near it. A Jacky lizard was near a hole in a grey box tree. It darted into the hole and emerged again dripping with water. About two-thirds of its overall body was composed of its tail which, like the rest of the upper body, was grey to brown with mottling and diamond patterns in darker shades. We got a good look at a male rufous whistler which was singing in a box tree. It was heard calling earlier.



Rufous Whistler

After lunch we drove to a dam near the homestead. The most common ducks on this dam were Chestnut Teal. Other species noted were Mallard, Black Duck, White-eyed Duck, Grey Teal, Wood Duck, Australasian Grebe and Black-fronted Dotterel. A Peregrine Falcon was circling high in the sky. The homestead and outbuildings were built of bluestone.



Pacific Black Duck

Last stop for the day was an area near the junction of the Toolern Creek and the Werribee River downstream from the Melton Reservoir. We examined Red Box and Blue Box trees which had been planted. A Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike was seen here. On one side of the Toolern Creek was an escarpment with lava at the bottom underneath volcanic tuff and at the top Tertiary gravels.

Les Hanrahan.

December Meeting Points

- 32 members and visitors were welcomed.
- Draft of Angahook-Otway Investigation submission prepared by secretary was approved by committee and has been sent to VEAC.
- Syllabus 2004: A survey by show of hands indicated a preference for caravan park type accommodation over a bush camp for a club campout venue.
- Ken McDonnell reported on a recent visit to the Cape Otway Centre for Conservation Ecology. Buildings have been erected from recycled and milled dead timber for accommodation, library and laboratory. The grazed land has been destocked and is regenerating. The owners conduct a wildlife rehabilitation centre. The enterprise would be worth a visit by field naturalists and the owners are willing to speak to the club.
- Members were reminded that nominations for 2004 Committee are required for the AGM in March.
- Blind Creek Landcare Group has requested Winter Swamp plant and animal lists. Pat Murphy will organise these.

Show and Tell.

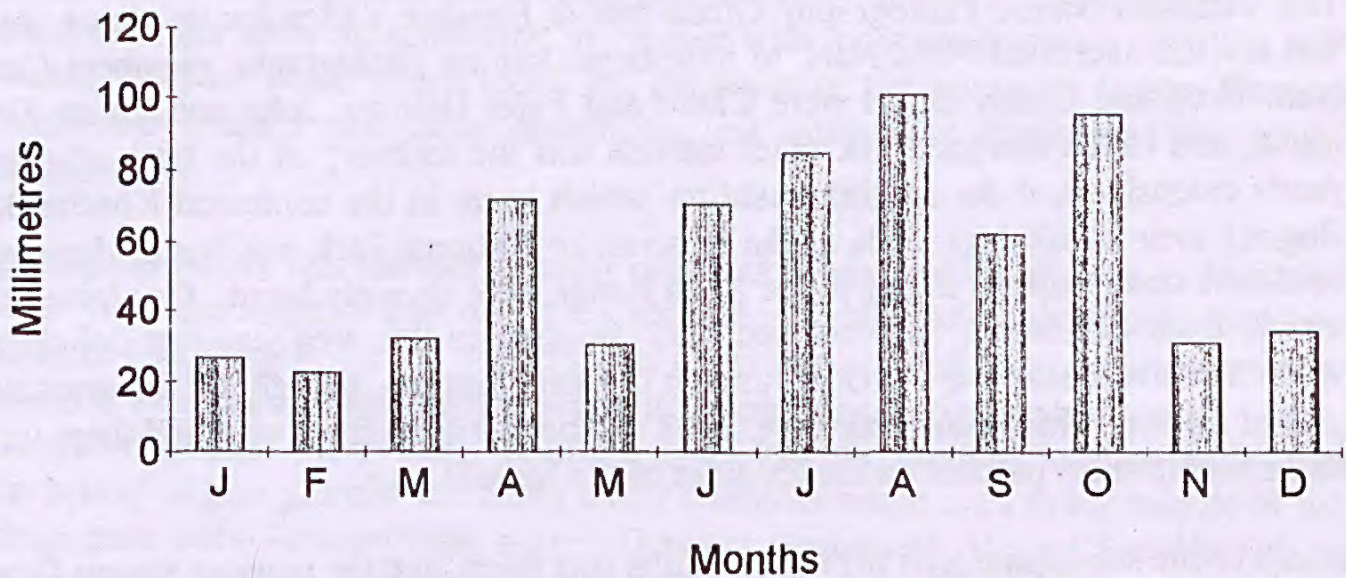
- Belinda Taylor: Corpse of Lowland Copperhead killed while slashing phalaris. Examination of stomach contents revealed a skink and 3 skink tails.

Field Reports

- John Gregurke: Common Sandpiper at Paul's Wetland.
- Carol Hall: 16 Glossy Ibis at Lake Burrumbeet. 37 cygnets currently on Lake Wendouree; 2 Pink-eared Duck and one Pelican seen on Lake for a few hours.
- Jack Netherway and Greg Binns: Rufous Fantail at Slaty Creek.
- Les Hanrahan: Koala in planted Blue Gum at Bungaree.
- Tony Johns: Swarm of bees disrupted cricket match.
- John Mildren: Clutch of 11 Black Ducks at Lake Wendouree. Two Eastern Grey Kangaroos in backyard at Mt Helen.

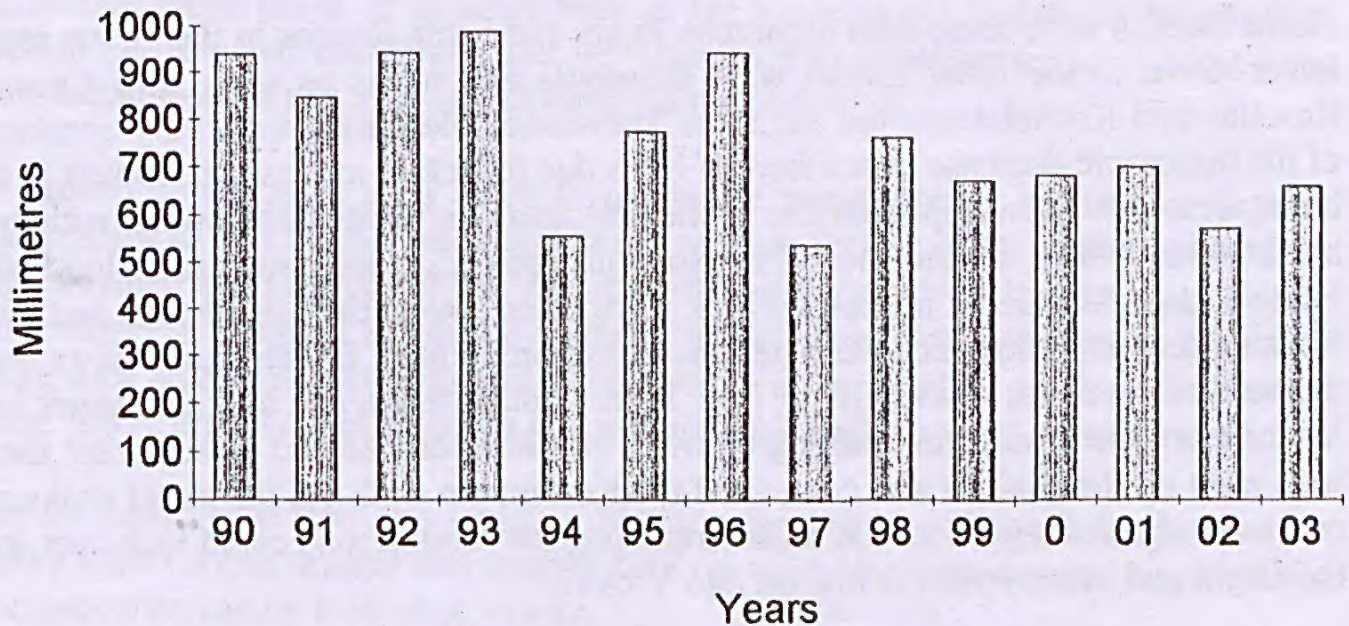
Wendouree - Rainfall 2003

Total 660.25



Readers may be interested in the graph above showing last year's monthly rainfall totals, and below, the yearly totals from 1990. Note the trend post-1997 compared to pre-1997. The official rainfall total for Ballarat was 536mm—as usual, a significant difference from Wendouree.

Wendouree - Annual Rainfall 1990 - 2003



Photographers and Field Naturalists at Kosciuszko

January 10-24 2004

The Victorian Nature Photography Group met at Perisher Valley for its alpine camp and invited interested Field Nats. to join them. Joining photography members Carol Hall, Greg and Genny Binns were Claire and Peter Dalman, John and Elaine Gregurke, and Helen Burgess. The chief interest was the recovery of the bush after last year's extensive and devastating bushfires which burnt in the combined Kosciuszko/Bogong area for 62 days. 68% of the Kosciuszko National Park was burnt. However, while the steep western slopes of the Main Range were severely burnt, the alpine area visible from Charlotte's Pass escaped, and walking in this area was just delightful, with extensive vistas and a goodly number of alpine flowers, though not the great carpets of flowers which can occur here. 2003 had been a good snow year and there were still sizeable snow patches on the lee sides of the Main Range.

Much of the sub-alpine area with snow-gums was burnt, and the popular Sawpit Creek area had been badly burnt providing little shade for walkers. The small waterfall on the upper section of Sawpit Creek, usually almost invisible in the normally thick shrub layer of wattles amid Candlebarks, White Sallees and Mountain Gums, could be seen from a considerable distance. However the new growth sprouting from snowgum lignotubers and the epicormic buds on the bigger tree species was being eaten by a wide variety of insects which provided some challenging photography: phasmids (stick insects) of various sizes and colours—yellow and green for the outermost leaves and stems, reddish-brown ones on the red stems of the new growth—Emperor Gum Moth caterpillars, looper caterpillars; and a small hairy caterpillar heavily infected with red mites. The leaf litter, usually inches deep in this area, was non-existent.

Flame Robins were seen, with numerous Pipits and Little Ravens in the alpine areas; lower down in the taller timber were thornbills and wrens as well, with Crimson Rosellas and Kookaburras; but the more knowledgeable birdos were very conscious of the noticeable decrease in numbers of birds due to lack of insects and flowers in the burnt areas. Mt. Stilwell proved one of the best areas for plants and flowers, with eye-brights everywhere, as did the valley floor just below an ice cave near Blue Lake. North Ramshead offered interesting rock formations among the granite tors, and even frogs in tiny pools (but not the Southern Corroboree Frog). Breathtaking views over the headwaters of the Murray River from Lake Cootapatamba and over the ranges into Victoria are the reward for walking between North Ramshead and Kosciuszko; those who went up the chairlift and completed the Kosciuszko walk via the metal walkway, or who trudged along the 18 km return trip along the summit road could look over into the Gechi and Murray valleys and on into Victoria.

The vista from Charlotte's Pass also gives one a panoramic view of the only mainland

area of Australia to undergo glaciation during the Pleistocene period. Blue, Club and Cootapatamba Lakes were all gouged out by small glaciers and all are dammed by ridges of moraine. Subdued cirque forms without lakes also exist in the lee of the Main Range, and the presence of snow patches today in summer illustrates the locations of major snow accumulation in the past with moisture borne on SW and NW winds. Boulder fields which today are the haunt of the Mountain Pygmy Possum accumulated under periglacial conditions, and solifluction continues today in the alpine areas.

Porcupine Rocks was another popular destination, reached by an easy well-graded track from the lodge. Views over the Crackenback valley and points south, and east to Lake Jindabyne rewarded walkers after traversing areas of burnt snow gums interspersed with everlastings, billy buttons of various kinds, trigger plants and a variety of native grasses. Floristically Rainbow Lake was the prettiest location with large carpets of trigger plants—including a tiny clump of white ones in the middle of the deep pink ones—everlastings, sorrel, Derwent Speedwell, Veined Sun Orchids, a tiny patch of miniature Fairies' Aprons in a seepage near the lake, a most attractive patch of yellow Nymphoides lilies (Entire Marshwort) in the water - and huge areas of Prickly Starwort which colonised bare burnt ground all over the sub-alpine and lower altitude areas. Vivid scarlet and green foliage of a native pelargonium coloured bare blackened areas of soil.

The weather was mostly kind; the first few days were sunny but very windy, calming down and allowing some of us a cloudless blue sky day on North Ramshead; a couple of days saw clouds hugging the ground above Perisher but which were no great deterrent to activities. In fact the clouds on sunny days were exactly what the photographer ordered! A spectacular thunderstorm on the Wednesday afternoon of the second week (most of us were back in the lodge) flung hailstones larger than golfballs at us—and our cars—and we scrambled to photograph them! Most cars were found to have just a few small dents on the bodywork.

So ground covers have been quick to recolonise burnt ground; the trees will take many years to restore the woodland areas to their former glory. Burnt sphagnum bogs threaten the viability of the rare Corroboree Frog which lays its eggs in the moss; between Smiggin Holes and Guthega research has already begun on rehabilitating such areas with silt traps and protective covering installed up slope from such a bog. There are plenty of research opportunities for ecologists for years to come.

Thanks must go to Rob and Cynthia Watkins for organising the lodge bookings, coping with various dramas and making sure we were entertained in the evenings by members showcasing their photography.

Carol Hall.

Calendar

February

- Fri. 6 Kate Blood (DPI Beaufort) Project Leader "Weed Alert Rapid Response".
Topic: *Garden Plants as Invasive Weeds in Bushland*. (Change of Speaker).
Sun. 8 Excursion: Geelong Botanic Gardens and nearby localities.

March

Please note: FNCB Meeting and AGM is the SECOND Friday!

- Fri.5—Mon.8 SEANA Camp-out and AGM, "Kangarooobie", Princetown.
Fri. 12 **AGM and Members' Slides/Photos - Theme: *High Country*.**
Sun. 14 Excursion: *Mineral Springs of Trentham and Lyonville*. Leader Greg Binns.

Supper Duty:

February: John and Trish Hughes.
March: Volunteers required

Committee

President Mrs. Carol Hall
Vice-President..... Mr. Greg Binns
Secretary..... Mr. John Gregurke
Treasurer..... Mr. Bob Curtain

Miss Helen Burgess.....
Miss Maureen Christie.....
Mrs. Claire Dalman.....
Mrs. Carol Hall (Editor).....

Miss Fran Hanrahan.....
Mr. Les Hanrahan.....
Mrs. Kay Preston.....

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Website: www.ballarat.yourguide.com.au Click on *Local Info*. Search *Environment*.

Meetings are held at the Ballarat Horticultural Centre, cnr. Gregory & Gillies Sts (VicRoads 254 F8) on the first Friday of the month at 7.30pm.

Excursions: Depart from Ballarat Market Place (formerly Creswick Plaza) Creswick Rd., Ballarat (VicRoads 255 M10) at 9.30 am unless otherwise specified.

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